Bass Anglers Perspective on the Recreation and Economics of Oregon Black Bass Fishing: An Argument Against De-Regulation

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Introduction

The motivation for this workshop was the Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife proposal to remove protective creel and size limits from all non-native species, including black bass. The objective is to reduce the number of non-native predators to improve survival of native fish species, primarily juvenile salmonids. B.A.S.S. is sympathetic with the challenges to maintain biological diversity and to preserve cultural heritage by restoring populations of native anadromous salmonids faced by Pacific Coast natural resource agencies. However, we do not think de-regulating black bass will achieve the desired objectives. In response to the Oregon de-regulation proposal, B.A.S.S. sent a letter on July 11, 1998 to the Oregon Fish and Wildlife Commission. We asked the Commission to:

> "...ask the Fish and Wildlife Department to withdraw its proposals to de-regulate black bass and instead concentrate their efforts on the larger habitat and resource issues that determine the future of Pacific salmon survival...".
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> "...we have no confidence that de-regulating black bass will have any noticeable, or measurable impact on restoring native salmonid spawning runs..." "... The risks far outweigh the speculative rewards...".

Those statements were supported in the July 11th letter with the following rationale:

1. In larger rivers and reservoirs in Oregon, the existing levels of exploitation of black bass suggest there would be only minimal, if any, significant reduction of black bass population density and biomass by removing size and creel limits.

2. On smaller waters, the removal of size and creel limits on black bass may immediately stimulate increased angling pressure and harvest. However, as larger bass are taken by anglers the survival of younger bass would be enhanced. Therefore, long-term overall biomass of bass will not change, although the size-structure of the bass populations would be degraded towards smaller/younger fish. This means more predatory mouths to feed - - - a completely reverse affect than the regulation intended. The loss of larger, older bass would diminish the rewards of bass angling and lead to reduced angling pressure, less harvest and ultimate removal of fewer bass - - - counter to the regulation objectives.

3. Black bass are only one of the several native and non-native fish that prey upon juvenile salmonids. Total predatory pressure on the young salmonids may change very little if one species component of the overall predator population is reduced. Other species, may compensate by increasing population size and predatory pressure. There are too many predator fish species, in too many ecological niches, to suggest that angling regulation changes alone will reduce overall predatory pressure on salmonids.

4. Today, black bass angling in Oregon is of high quality and the numbers of bass anglers are increasing. Ecologically, Oregon may regret that black bass were ever introduced, but recreationally and economically bass are generating positive benefits from an avid angler group that buy fishing licenses and equipment and fuel that generate Federal excise tax dollars. Relaxation of regulatory protection on black bass populations will eventually translate into fewer

black bass anglers, not more, diminished support for ODFW and lost economic growth - - - without improving the salmonid populations.

5. The mere perception that the proposed bass de-regulations will degrade bass populations will generate a negative image of ODFW, regardless of the actual impact of regulation change on the black bass populations. The recognition that ODFW is willing to risk a large perceived negative impact on Oregon bass fishing quality to achieve a small, if any, gain in salmonid survival will destroy the credibility of ODFW to manage warmwater fisheries for a generation. This will be true particularly if increased juvenile salmonid survival cannot be clearly demonstrated and correlated with the bass population changes.

This paper adds to the above rationale. It examines the very positive recreational and economic contributions from Oregon bass fishing and argues both the futility and the risks of trying to improve native fish survival by de-regulating black bass.

This decision is much more complicated than merely balancing concerns and values of various stakeholder constituencies. Removing regulations on black bass may provide philosophical and ideological gratification for some who think any sacrifice is justified as long as "some" gains in native fish survival are achieved. That gratification would come at a high cost! We believe there will be minimal, if any, gain in native fish survival from de-regulating bass. And, bass fishing use will decline way out of proportion with any negative impacts caused by de-regulation on the quality or stability of black bass populations.

Black Bass Recreation

Black bass neither became America's most favorite and targeted species because of accident, nor by natural selection. According to the U.S. Department of Interior (USDI) 1996 National Survey of Fishing and Hunting and Wildlife Associated Recreation (1997), 44% of freshwater anglers fish for bass and bass anglers generated 40% of all U. S.
freshwater anglers days. Three major factors have catapulted bass to number one: 1). new reservoirs, 2). bass availability and, 3). marketing.

New Reservoirs

The reservoir building boom created new bass habitat. When reservoirs were built on coldwater streams and rivers, warmwater and/or two-story fisheries flourished, but often at the expense of native coldwater fishes. Fishery managers of the past should not be criticized for taking bold steps to manage these new reservoir ecosystems. Introduction of predator species exotic to a watershed may seem like an ecological crime to some observers, but in the 1930's through the 1960's it was considered imaginative fishery management. Upon reservoir completion, fishery managers had to plan fish communities and fill the new vacant ecological niches. In many cases there was no consultation between project designers and fishery managers before, or during, construction. Often fishery managers had little information and even fewer resources. Generally, they tried to introduce predators that could simply utilize the forage species indigenous to the watershed. Later in the reservoir management era, forage management became as important as predator introduction.

Bottom-line is that bass, and other non-native predators, have now become permanent residents of new watersheds. They are providing recreation and, unless very drastic ecological intervention is taken, they are here to stay.

The reservoir construction era was based upon the management philosophy of multiple use. Boat launch and public recreation facilities were planned components of the design and construction. The angling public now had new, focused destination points to gain access to free use of huge, navigable waterways. Black bass were destined to become the primary sportfish species in most of these new impoundment's, even though bass were not native to many of the reservoirs west of the Continental Divide.

Bass Availability

Human population growth and economic productivity of the 17 states of the American West required capturing and storing the sparse, seasonal rainfall and mountain snow-melt for distribution to agricultural land and urban centers. The taming of southern and mid-western U. S. rivers for flood control, hydro power and to enhance commercial navigation expanded the native range of black bass to millions of acres of new habitat. Because these water projects were built and/or managed by government agencies and public utilities and authorities, public boat and fishing access was guaranteed. In many cases these launch sites, marinas and public use facilities were the best anglers had ever seen.

By the 1960's and 1970's black bass became available and accessible coast to coast. At this stage in the evolution of bass fishing, the bass populations, and access to them, were way ahead of angler interest and use. Biological productivity of the new reservoirs and only light angler exploitation produced phenomenal catches of large bass for the relatively few anglers who pursued them.

Marketing

The "bass boom" began in 1967 when Ray Scott founded Bass Anglers Sportsman Society (B.A.S.S.). It is unequivocal within the sportfishing industry that Ray's vision, energy, enthusiasm and intellect sparked the rapid and phenomenal evolution in fishing boats, fishing tackle, angler clothing, TV angling shows, angling ethics and bass fishing passion we enjoy today. The chronology of bass fishing and the contribution of Ray Scott and B.A.S.S., Inc. are well chronicled in BASS Master magazine (1998) and other publications - - - I won't repeat them here.

Ray marketed bass fishing as a wholesome, exciting and competitive activity. He focused on competitive angling for marketing leverage. To successfully compete, anglers wanted an edge - - - the best stuff. Manufacturers eagerly produced the "winning" tackle, lures and boats. This niche market began growing. More and more anglers read about the "where to" and "how to" of great U. S. bass fishing. They watched on TV as America's best bass fishermen weighed-in glamorous tournament catches, endorsed new tackle and used efficient, fast and safe fishing boats that would have been considered whimsical dreams only a few years back.

The bass fishing market is still expanding - - - the peak is still in our future. New bass tournaments, bass fishing organizations and bass fishing publications are emerging to compete in the bass market. Today's bass fisherman enjoys high-quality angling toys that our grandfathers would never have believed. Bass fishing on TV is now presented for both national and regional markets. The fact that bass anglers generate more days of angling on waters where other sportfish species are numerically dominant is a prime example of the successful bass marketing phenomena.

Bass anglers handicap themselves by casting (and losing) expensive artificial lures when live-bait techniques would undoubtedly produce more action. Why do they do this? Because B.A.S.S. tournaments prohibit the use of live-bait and trolling. This has established the standards of fair-chase for dedicated bass anglers to emulate. They gauge their own skill and angling success against published catches of the pro anglers. They try to adapt the proven winning techniques and the lures of the pros to their local fishing.

The point of this marketing discussion is to illustrate that positive forces will generate angler enthusiasm while negative forces will depress them. Angling rumors and myths spread like oil on water. Reports of bad fishing can seriously magnify the drop-off in angling pressure. Fishery managers often witness "self-fulfilling prophesies" during angling regulation debates. The doomsayers generate enough negative publicity about their theory of the impact of proposed regulations to drive-off potential anglers. This loss of angling is usually disproportionate to the actual resource situation. Conversely, just announcing new management plans for a fishery can stimulate accelerated angling use and perceptions of "better" fishing long before the proposed management actions have had time to improve the fish population.

De-regulation of black bass in Oregon, regardless of the biological impact, will produce negative market forces that will reduce bass fishing use, depress the sale of boats, accessories, and fishing tackle, diminish expenditures in the hospitality industry and kill the enthusiasm of some of the biggest supporters of Oregon natural resources - - - Oregon bass anglers.

Just the perceptions of a degraded bass resource will cause this loss of use and support. If real negative biological impact occurs to bass populations from de-regulation, then it will cause even more drop in fishing use and expenditures. The really sad part of this situation is that the bass fishing market in the western and northwest U. S. still has not peaked. If negative market forces cause a drop now, the loss must be measured against "what could have been", not from what exists today.

Use and Economics

The discussion of angler use, expenditures and economic activity that follows is based on data from the U. S. Department of the Interior 1991 and 1996 National Surveys on Hunting, Fishing and Wildlife-Associated Recreation (1993) (1997) and analysis of those data by the American Sportfishing Association (1997).

Freshwater angling use in Oregon has been stable, or slightly declining. From 1990 to 1997 fishing license sales in Oregon declined by about 10% (751,945 in 1990 to 678,377 in 1997). During this period Oregon's population increased by 10%. Thus the proportion of Oregonians who fish actually dropped by 15% from 1990 to 1997.

The USDI survey (1993) estimates that 605,000 anglers fished Oregon freshwaters in 1991, generating 6,490,000 days of use. In 1996, 589,000 anglers fished 7,118,000 days (USDI, 1997). This represents a 2.3% drop in anglers from 1991 to 1996, but an increase in angler trips of 10%. The disparity of less anglers but more use is consistent with the national averages. The generally accepted explanation for this is that casual anglers comprise the drop-outs, but avid anglers are spending more time and money on their favorite pastime.

Black bass fishing in Oregon during the 1990's reflects a rate of growth similar to the national bass fishing boom in the 1980's. Bass fisherman are avid anglers! From 1991 to 1996 there was an overall increase of 628,000 days of fishing in Oregon (10% increase). The growth of Oregon bass fishing days went from 605,000 days in 1991 to 1,212,000 days in 1996 - - - a 602,000 day jump that made-up 95% of the total increase in angling days in Oregon over that five year period.

Bass anglers in Oregon obviously represent an enthusiastic, dynamic and vital portion of the Oregon sportfishing economy. They spent $199 million in 1996, up from $105 million in 1991, with state and Federal tax generation of $2.8 million and $5.3 million respectively. Average daily expenditures by Oregon anglers equal $86/day, and they generate an ultimate economic output of $164 per day.

It is impossible to predict how much bass fishing will decline from de-regulation. However, we believe the drop in use will be significant and each day lost can be multiplied against those daily expenditure and economic output figures. If bass fishing use grew by 600,000 days in five years, it can shrink that much just as quickly!

Certainly, improvement in native fish species populations like salmon and steelhead could generate increased economic output to off-set losses from bass fishing. But we don't believe that de-regulation of bass will cause any compensating improvement in native salmonid fishing quality.

Recommendation Summary

- The decision whether bass should be de-regulated involves much more than balancing concerns of interest groups. Removing regulations may provide ideological gratification to salmonid restoration enthusiasts, but without achieving the targeted biological benefits. That false gratification does not justify the risks to the Oregon bass fishery. Abandon this idea. There is no precedent to even suggest a positive impact on salmonids would occur.

- Continue managing Oregon black bass to provide quality fishing experiences for Oregon anglers.

- If, when and where it has been biologically and economically demonstrated that long-term reduction in population size of black bass will significantly enhance juvenile native salmonid survival, then the Oregon B.A.S.S. Federation will be willing to consider invasive intervention to remove bass, if that loss of bass fishing opportunity could be mitigated elsewhere. Well designed, small scale research proposals would also be well received by Oregon B.A.S.S. Federation.

- Black bass are so ubiquitous in large Oregon watersheds that it is futile to continue to treat them as unwelcome tourists. Bass are in the bigger watersheds for the long-haul. Their reproductive potential, adaptability and difficulty to capture combine to render their removal a very cost-ineffective venture.

- In smaller watersheds, periodic partial or total chemical reclamation, along with other habitat modification, may suppress bass populations enough to improve salmonid survival. But, this certainly will not eliminate bass. Whether the costs of this aggressive intervention could be justified long-term still remains to be tested.

- Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife should conduct periodic (five year?), statewide, angler surveys to document and segregate types of angling use, preferred species, angler opinions and expenditures. This will facilitate benefit/cost fishery management decision-making.

- Threshold biological and economic criteria must be developed to expedite decisions on when, and if, non-native recreational fisheries could be, and should be, sacrificed to enhance native fish survival. These decisions should be made based on objective facts, not subjective feelings.

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